

Script IV

Unheard Voices and Nonviolent Struggle

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The previous lesson dealt with the accommodation of racism in some theological applications. Not surprisingly, there have been protests of all kinds made against racist practices. And we are once again in a time when these protests are much in our news. In this lesson, I will offer my perspective on why an activist, nonviolent protest or active nonviolent resistance is both in line with the story of Jesus that we discussed in lesson II and also a very practical way to proceed.

In an interview with Mike Wallace in 1966, Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “A riot is the language of the unheard.” That comment resurfaced in recent months following riots by African Americans in Ferguson Missouri, Baltimore Maryland and Milwaukee Wisconsin. Deaths of young African American men at the hands of police officers precipitated the riots.

King’s comment raises important questions. If King is correct, and I think he is, why do African Americans feel unheard, and what message is behind the anger expressed through riots? For Christians, in light of what we saw in the previous lesson, there are questions about our response to two kinds of violence—that of the police officers and that of the rioters. “Riot” is a blanket term that has been used to cover a range of activities, sometimes even including civil disobedience. In this essay, I use “riot” to refer to destructive acts, such as looting, burning of cars, and beating of people. But as we will see, I support other kinds of vigorous protest.

Two recent books suggest reasons for anger at the system of policing. In *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander provides a detailed analysis of how the so-called “war on

drugs” is directed primarily against people of color, although statistics show that the percent of people in white communities involved in illegal drug use is the same as in black communities. The result of the war on drugs is mass incarceration of African Americans, and with a felony on their records, they have difficulty the rest of their lives in finding jobs and housing. This so-called “war” has thus created a permanent underclass. Alexander calls the process “metaphorically, the new Jim Crow.”

The book *Pulled Over*, by Charles R. Epp, Steven Maynard-Moody and Donald Haider-Markel, describes “investigatory stops” that alienate African Americans. Investigatory stops are those in which the officer uses an excuse such as failure to signal a lane change as a reason to stop a driver. However, the real purpose of the stop is to search the car for drugs or weapons. Across the country, in a pattern well documented by Epp, Maynard-Moody and Haider-Markel, officers are trained to stop primarily people of color, the vast majority of whom are innocent. These stops of innocent people for trivial reasons create suspicion of police among African Americans, while white people who are not subject to such stops more often trust the police. Much more could be said, but I believe that these two books describe conditions that contribute to the anger that is expressed in riots.

Theology may contribute indirectly. When we consider theology in its context, we are able to see how some Christian beliefs contribute to the hopelessness of rioting. Recall what we saw in the previous lesson. By emphasizing the belief that the important confession about Jesus is his deity, issues of race and violence may be seen as political issues, unrelated to Christian faith. Thus, some Christians have long felt comfortable in ignoring the race-related conditions that contribute to the anger expressed in riots.

I understand the anger that produces riots, but I do not believe that that option embodies the transformative way of Jesus. Observation of history shows that violence is cyclical. It is always possible to take one step farther back in history to find the factor that precipitated a given eruption of violence. An act of violence that is supposed to

teach a lesson and enact justice actually sets the stage for retaliation and a new round of violence. Riots provoke more police presence. Eventually the riot loses energy and “calm” or “peace” is said to be restored. But it is a false calm, a false peace; the underlying problem remains, and the anger of the unheard begins to build again, smoldering until the next spark sets off an explosion.

I suggest that a better expression of anger by the unheard is nonviolent struggle. Nonviolent struggle can expose the injustice of the system and make clear the need for change. Rather than being an expression from a position of privilege, nonviolence shaped by a commitment to racial justice is revolutionary and resilient. It makes visible the need for change, and sets in motion real forces of change. Because it is not merely bent on expressing anger and waging destruction, nonviolent struggle can be maintained for a long period of time. Anger, turned into righteous indignation, can become a powerful motivation for the good, sustaining a protest until real change occurs. Nonviolent struggle exposes injustice and speaks up for systemic change. And alongside this nonviolent struggle, white people or those who benefit from positions of privilege most certainly should be willing to acknowledge their complicity with the system and be willing to challenge its injustice, and join in nonviolent struggle themselves.

Jesus certainly taught nonviolent struggle and engaged in it himself. As Walter Wink explains in *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*, when Jesus says, “resist not evil” (King James Version), it actually means “do not resist evil with similar evil,” or “do not mirror evil.” Jesus gave three examples of this kind of resistance. Turning the other cheek was a way for a supposed social inferior to resist humiliation when slapped by a superior. Giving the outer garment along with the undergarment and walking around naked exposed an unjust debtor’s court system in a society where shame fell on the one who caused the nakedness. Going the second mile would put a Roman soldier in violation of his own regulations, which allowed him to order a civilian to carry his 60-80

pound pack for one mile. Going the second mile put the civilian in charge, as the soldier begged him to put the pack down lest the commanding officer discover the violation of regulations.

Consider Jesus' healing of the withered hand on the Sabbath in Luke 6. He could have waited until the next day. However, Jesus called the man to come and stand by him, and then waited till all eyes were on him before telling the man to stretch out his hand. This healing was a deliberately confrontational and highly-visible action that exposed the misuse of the Sabbath.

It has been suggested that the story of Jesus in what is called "the cleansing of the temple" was a violent act. The Gospel of John adds that Jesus made a whip from cords. That fact may be hard to bear for people whose story includes a long history of brutal beatings. A whip in Jesus' hands does not sound like a nonviolent action.

I propose that we look at this action in the total scope of Jesus' life. At the beginning of his ministry, in the synagogue at Nazareth, he announced that his ministry was to bring good news to the poor, release of captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:18). He taught love of enemies, responding to evil without mirroring it, and gave the three examples of nonviolent resistance. His story contains many acts of healing, which often contain statements of forgiveness. He forgave the woman taken in adultery. He broke Sabbath laws by healing on the Sabbath. His teachings and travel in Samaria confronted racism. Much more could be mentioned. At his trial, Jesus told Pilate, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here" (John 18:36). In other words, Jesus' kingdom had different standards than Pilate's kingdom. Finally, there is the fact that Jesus did not use the action in the temple to initiate a violent rebellion, nor did the crucifixion of Jesus stimulate his followers to start a violent rebellion. I cannot see the Jesus of this story using the whip to injure people in the way that whips caused so much

pain in African American history, both past and present. Jesus used the whip to herd animals.

When considered in the full arc of Jesus' life, I think that his action in the temple is one more confrontation to put alongside the Sabbath healings, and more. I put it in the category of vigorous, nonviolent protest or activism, an act of righteous indignation, or even righteous anger. As he said, "My house shall be a house of prayer; but you have made it a den of robbers" (Luke 19:46).

There is actually a long history of nonviolent struggle. Among contemporary models is Martin Luther King, Jr., the most prominent leader of the American Civil Rights movement.

Since God is revealed in Jesus, Jesus' life—his teaching and example of nonviolent struggle—reflect the character, or the very grain of the universe, that God created. I believe that nonviolent struggle reflects the grain of the universe. Martin Luther King, Jr. drew collaborators from many sides. We come to the struggle for racial justice from various social locations, but from our various sides, white people and people of color can join together to expose injustice and to support nonviolent struggle wherever we see such action that reflects the grain of the universe revealed in the story of Jesus.

Discussion Questions

- 1) How do you understand the difference between riot and protest?
- 2) Have you ever participated in a protest? How did it make you feel?
- 3) The author of this essay says that a nonviolent protest can be sustained for a long time. Do you agree? Why?

4) The author writes that kinds of nonviolent protest are limited only by our imagination. What kinds of unusual or creative protests and demonstrations can you visualize to confront a variety of issues?